SPECIAL SECTION:
As Seen on TV

Introduction: "As Seen on TV"

Brian Herrera and Henry Bial, Guest Editors

What is it about television that so frustrates, fascinates, and repels theatre and performance scholars? Despite escalating interest in digital technology and new media, the field of theatre and performance studies seems not yet to have come to grips with the most seen performance medium on the planet: television. Where, for example, is the theory that can be applied to the PBS series *Great Performances*, *Philco Television Playhous*e, and the original *Hallmark Hall of Fame*? How should scholars analyze *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) or Rogers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* (1957), respectively the first opera and musical to be composed for the live broadcast medium? What is the dramaturgical difference between a play, a screenplay, and a "teleplay?"

These and similar examples point to an intriguing blind spot between the fields of theatre and media study. In the live theatrical broadcast—a broad definition of which would include awards shows, Super Bowl half-time extravaganzas, and variety shows from *Texaco Star Theater* (1948-1956) to *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present)—television actually approaches the shared experience of spectatorship that eludes film and recorded video. In the case of call-in shows and telethons, there may even be some real-time interaction between performers and audience. In other words, the live broadcast of the theatrical event offers a great many characteristics that live performance usually claims as its unique province. We know that seeing *Oklahoma!* live and the same show "live on PBS" are not identical experiences, but don't they have more in common with each other than either has with many examples from its own medium? Who has the more authentically shared experience? Thirty people who saw the same production of *Don Giovanni* on thirty different nights, or thousands of spectators who sit simultaneously in movie theatres around the country to watch *The Met Live in HD*? And how might we begin puzzling through the multi-platform production experiment of *Legally Blonde – The Musical* in its myriad iterations: "live" performance; ubiquitous rebroadcasts; subsequent reality show on the MTV cable network in 2007 and 2008?

We understand that so-called live performance and television are not identical experiences. No one would ever mistake one for the other (though, as Philip Auslander and others have influentially argued, the increasing use of video screens at concerts and other public events challenges even that proposition). Yet even those theatre and performance scholars who are well versed in theories of liveness, phenomenology, and reception theory seem hard pressed to articulate exactly what those differences are. With apologies to Erving Goffman, all television is not, of

course, theatrical, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.[1]

This special section seeks to specify—if not resolve—some of the distinctions between the theatrical and the televisual. The scholars represented excavate the depths of those stubborn gaps or aporias within dramatic theory and criticism that emerge freshly exposed when those methods are applied to televised performances. This special section also aims to evince the "state of the field" by spotlighting a selection of essays that rehearse generative new ways theatre and performance studies might engage with the televisual.

The first two essays selected for this special section theorize the interplay between the televisual and the theatrical, while those that follow analyze particular examples of such confluence. In the first pair of essays, authors Nick Salvato and Alla Gaddassik undertake ruminative theoretical investigations into television's performative affect. In "Prosthetic Intimacies: Television, Performance Studies, and the Makings of (a) Life," Nick Salvato proposes that performance studies might serve as a ready theoretical "toolkit" for theorizing the myriad modes of affective intimacy rehearsed within television fandom. For Salvato, the act of "watching" television is its own performance, a "procesural and relational unfolding of 'doings' or 'acts' in time and over space." Salvato explicates several instances of viewer practice as examples of what he calls "prosthetic intimacy," or the "subjective experiences of proximity and affectivity made possible and legible" by the televisual object. Alla Gaddassik's "At a Loss for Words: Televisual Liveness and Corporeal Interruption" explores the particular affective pleasures derived from the interplay of media flow and corporeal interruption within the experience of televisual liveness. Gaddassik's essay examines several instances in which "'authentic' somatic acts" (gasps, silences, aggressive eruptions) emerge as significant gestures in ratifying the "liveness" of the televisual spectacle as she explores how such corporeal "interruptions" operate as one of television's essential technologies. For Gaddassik, such corporeal interruptions of the televisual flow function as necessary, constitutive features of the televisual mode that have been largely uninterrogated by either media or performance scholars.

In the special section's remaining two essays, Michelle Liu Carriger and Jay Gipson-King utilize the tools provided by theories of theatre, drama, and performance to offer provocative methodological experiments in understanding how the televisual configures contemporary performance of the historical past. In "Historionics: Neither Here Nor There with Historical Reality TV," Michelle Liu Carriger examines the interplay of fact/fiction, affect/truth, past/present within a distinctive sub-genre of contemporary reality television: historical reality television (HRTV) programs in which "ordinary" people are inserted into reenactments of historical environments. Carriger's essay assesses the circumstances of HRTV production, as well as reactions of both historians and media critics to such production. As she does so, Carriger argues that the conspicuously affective artifice

of HRTV productions also illuminates the dramaturgical sensibilities that undergird the writing of even ostensibly objective histories. Jay Gipson-King's "*The Path to 9/11* versus *Stuff Happens*: Media and Political Efficacy in the War on Terror" offers a close, critical comparison of two clearly different – yet compellingly similar – theatricalizations of the historical events leading up to the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq in 2003. By juxtaposing popular press reactions to a U.S. television mini-series (ABC-TV's 2006 single U.S. broadcast of *The Path to 9/11*) and a British stage production (David Hare's internationally produced 2004 play, *Stuff Happens*), Gipson-King's critical comparison troubles easy assumptions about how each of these productions shaped understandings of the recent past.

Yet we remain curious about what seem to be the most intransigent aporias within the critical theorization of theatre and drama in this televisual era, gaps that are underscored both by the questions these essays address and also those that they do not. We received no submissions addressing what we anticipated to be among the most conspicuous intersections between theatre and television: the actual live broadcast of theatre events. That this gap persists even in this "As Seen On TV" special section suggests that essential (inter)disciplinary challenges yet remain if theatre and performance studies are to reckon fully with the obdurate interplay of the theatrical and the televisual in the performance cultures of both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

We believe that proper theorization of theatre "as seen on tv" (and vice versa) is essential to theatre and performance studies for two reasons, both of which are strongly suggested by the contributors to this section. First, television has become what theatre was a century ago: the dominant mass medium and the paradigm for the communication of culture. Just as early film and television were shaped by the conventions of the stage (even to the proscenium shape of the screen), popular media today, from older forms such as theatre to laptops and smartphones, take their cues from television. Theatre and performance scholars ignore this at our own risk. Second, only detailed analysis of the intersections between television and theatre can tell us what, if anything, the latter can offer that the former cannot. In short, we believe that if you really want to defend and preserve the relevance of theatre and performance studies, you must watch television.

Notes

1. We cite here Goffman's oft-quoted dictum, "All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify." Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959) 72.